

# KINGDOM OF CONTRASTS

*Anxiety rides the bus  
on a trip to Jordan*

By Eve Glicksman

**JORDAN** — From the Promised Land, to the land of no promises. That's how it felt to a busload of 14 American Jews crossing the Jordanian border from Israel.

Many of us signed up for this particular two-week Israel tour because the itinerary included three days in Jordan. Yet, quips about "bugs on toast" breakfasts and mysterious border detain-

## IF YOU GO

For tourism information, contact the Jordanian Information Bureau, (202) 265-1606.

ments belied our anxiety. Should we avoid using Israeli currency in Jordan although shekels are accepted, we wondered?

The problem was that we had no idea what to expect. On arrival, for instance, the Jordanian government gave us a uniformed "Tourist Policeman" to accompany us everywhere.

Don't mind the gun, it's all very routine, we were told. I wondered whether the unfortunately named "Tourist Police" were really for our protection or theirs.

The security check at the Allenby Bridge border also reinforced doubts about our welcome. We each endured five or more passport checks. Still, political tensions have eased since my dated *Fodor's* guide recommended in 1993 that tourists planning to visit Arab nations ask to have their entry to Israel stamped on a separate card, not their passports — this, to maximize chances they won't be turned away by Arab customs officials.

On entering the country, we were greeted by a life-size King Hussein poster that would surreally reappear everywhere — behind hotel desks, along the road, on key chains. We peered circumspectly at our Jordanian guide, Basem, and bus driver, Mohammed.

No, we were not in Kansas anymore. Primitive Bedouin tent settlements dotted the dusty terrain. We wandered through ancient castle and crusader outposts. Goat, lamb and camel herds roamed with impunity. Arab men wearing kaffiyeh (long cloth head covering) waved and children pointed. We were the attraction.

A superb buffet lunch hosted by a gracious, friendly staff allayed our wariness about Jordanian food and hospitality. After the meal, our enthused hosts invited the bolder among us to inhale the traditional narghile, a bizarre-looking waterpipe with a spicy taste.

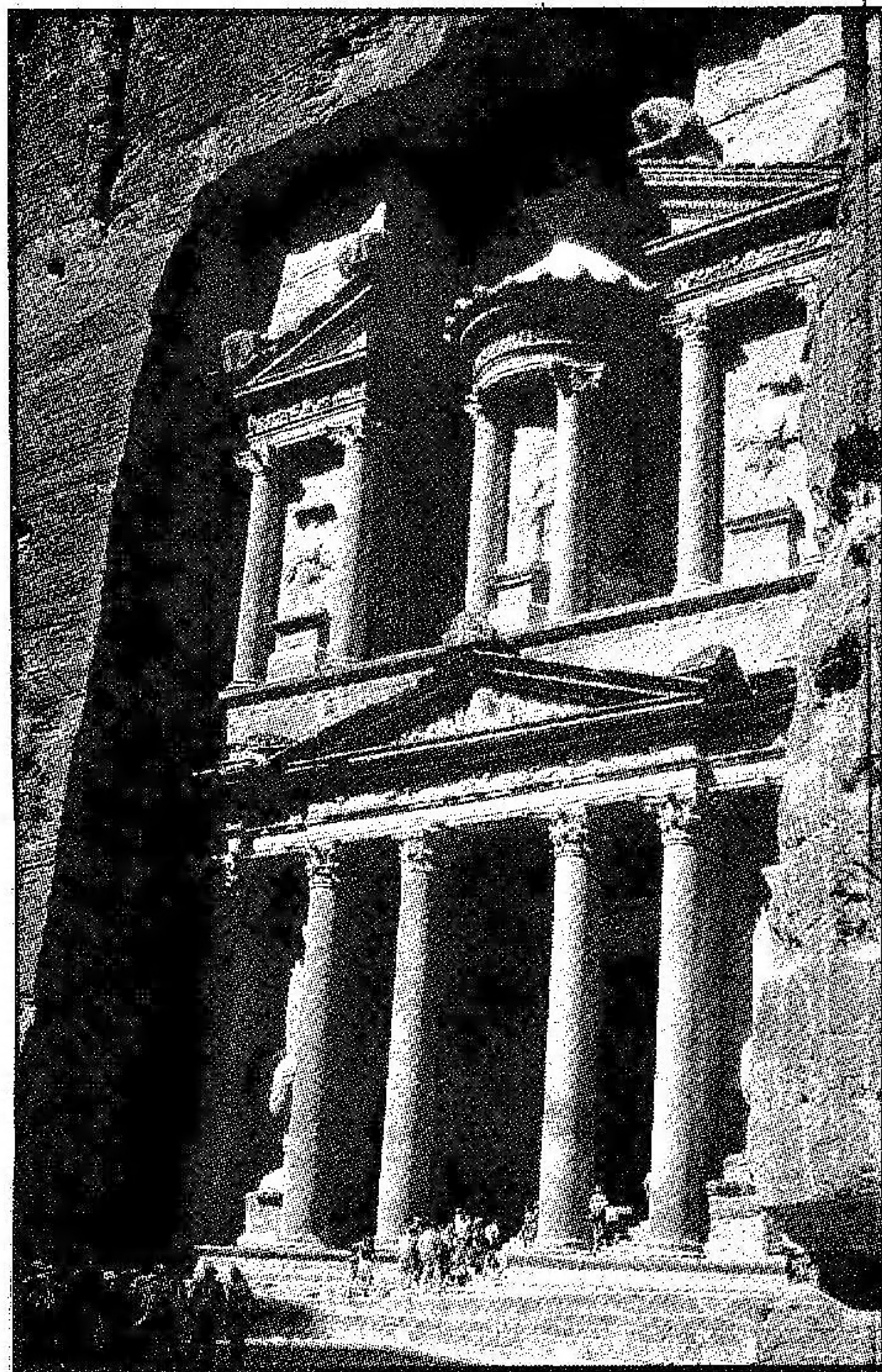
That afternoon, a tour through the ancient city of Jerash (formerly Gerasa, during Roman domination) far surpassed any ruins I had ever seen in Rome, both in magnitude and in preservation. The tracks of chariot wheels were visible in the stones underfoot dating from A.D. 130. The site had been protectively buried under sand before excavation in 1925.

Gerasa was one of the wealthiest cities in the Roman empire until an earthquake in A.D. 749 hastened its decline. We walked down the still-erect colonnaded main street, past Byzantine churches, baths, fountains and sacred temples. Most impressive

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Photos by the Jordan Tourism Board

The "Rose Red City" of Petra, site of the filming of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.



# Jordanian desert a sand painting of ancient grandeur

JORDAN from 1T

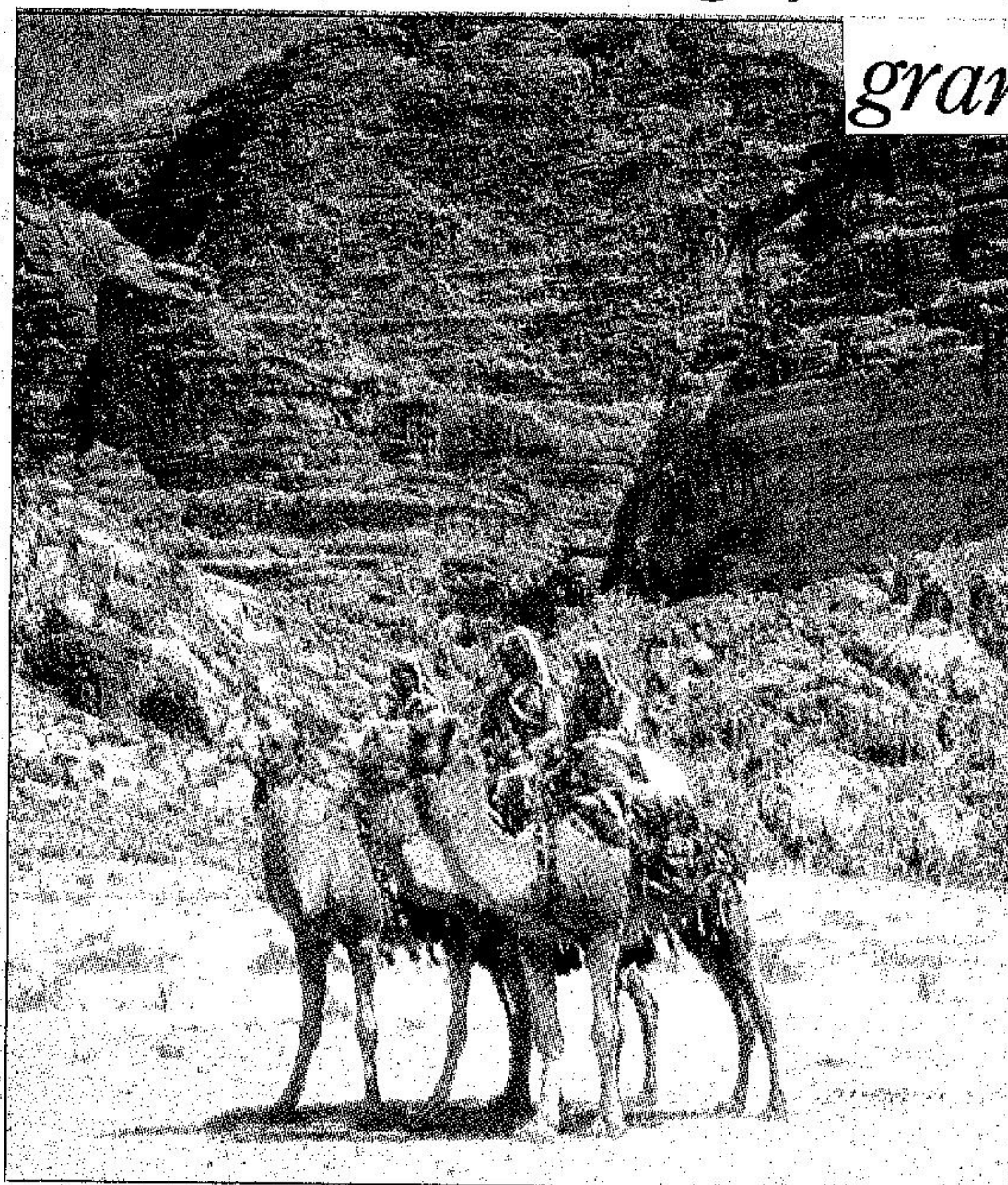
was the 3,000-seat theater — an acoustical masterpiece — where you could still see Greek letters designating the reserved seats.

The next day we visited Petra, the “lost city” carved out of a gorge. Made famous in the filming of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Petra is nicknamed the “Rose Red City” for its spectacular pink-hued rock walls. A prehistoric quake literally ripped through the rock that forms the chasm entrance.

Archaeological excavations in 1924 uncovered remarkably intact tombs, water systems and monuments from the 2,000-year-old Nabataean civilization, later overtaken by Romans. Petra was opened to the public in 1960, although it was 1977 before American tourists arrived.

Apart from the ruins, I was awed by Jordan's expansive deserts, never before understanding how sand, rock and barrenness could be so breathtaking. We slithered through the dunes of Wadi Rum by jeep. No one here ever knows what the temperature is when you ask (hey, it's just another 115-degree day to them), but I have never suffered such intense heat.

In Amman, Jordan's capital, this Philadelphian warmed up on discovering the city used to be called “Philadelphia,” after the ancient monarch Ptolemy Philadelphus. In the city of Madaba, known for its mosaics, we marveled at an intricate Byzantine map of the Holy Land embedded in a



Jordan Tourism Board

**Much of *Lawrence of Arabia* was filmed in this desert region of Wadi Rum in southern Jordan.**

church floor, plus exquisitely colored mosaics elsewhere.

To be sure, Jordan is a country of contrasts. The poverty of roadside

refugee camps and young boys hawking chewing gum is front and center. But around the bend is a pocket of architecturally stunning, Beverly



Hills equivalent homes, along with the block-long \$78 million American embassy we were prohibited from taking photos of. And to complete the confused picture, add a McDonalds, Pizza Hut and Subway to the desert landscape.

I left Jordan surprised I had never heard about the amazing Greco-Roman archaeological treasures here. The shroud of Muslim terrorism likely accounts for a lot of unabashed ignorance about the Arab world. Tourism is the No. 1 industry today in Jordan. Still, there were no lines, no crowds, during this peak August season.

Nor could one ignore the in-your-face Israeli soldiers and machine guns on the streets of Jerusalem. The bombing of the Jerusalem market occurred two weeks before our trip; two people scheduled for this American Jewish Congress tour canceled. Less than a week upon our return to the United States, another suicide bomber killed more civilians on Jerusalem's Ben Yehuda Street where we had strolled. Ten German tourists were killed in Cairo soon after.

Even after touring Jordan without incident, I'm unsure about what should be feared and what are foolish misgivings. Still, I feel lucky to have seen this fascinating country before the busloads arrive, sure to follow Middle East peace, or, at least the perception of it.

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